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## RHODE ISLAND FRESHWATER WETLAND MONITORING AND ASSESSMENT PLAN

Notes from meetings with Wetland Partners

June 2, 2005 – DEM Staff

(wetlands, compliance & inspection, sustainable watersheds)

June 20, 2005 – RI Wetland Partners

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**TO:** RI Wetlands Partners

**FROM:** Deb Pelton

**SUBJECT:** Review of comments on draft RI freshwater wetland monitoring and assessment plan

**DATE:** June 24, 2005

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### ATTENDEES:

#### June 2, 2005 – DEM Wetland Staff, EPA

Deb Pelton, NEIWPC at DEM  
Carol Murphy, DEM  
Russ Chateauneuf, DEM  
Marty Wencek, DEM  
Chuck Horbert, DEM  
Hank Ellis, DEM  
Dan Kowel, DEM  
Jane Kelly, DEM  
Kate McPherson, DEM  
Jennifer Stout, DEM  
Steve Tyrrell, DEM  
Fred Presley, DEM  
Jeanne Voorhees, EPA Region 1  
Peter Holmes, EPA Region 1

#### June 20, 2005 – RI Wetland Partners

Deb Pelton, DEM  
Carol Murphy, DEM  
Russ Chateauneuf, DEM  
Sue Kiernan, DEM  
Marty Wencek, DEM  
Matt Schweisberg, EPA Region 1  
Peter Holmes, EPA Region 1  
Cathy Wigand, EPA AED  
Rick McKinney, EPA AED  
Helen Cottrell, NBEP  
Julie Lundgren, TNC  
Pete August, URI  
Frank Golet, URI  
David Gregg, RINHS  
Eugenia Marks, ASRI  
Jen West, ASRI

Partners who could not attend, but with whom we are communicating, are from NRCS, CRMC, RIAWS, RIDOT, Bryant Univ., USGS, USFWS, Save the Bay, ESS Group, and Mason Associates.

### AGENDA

1. Welcome & introduction
2. Meeting objective: To share comments we've heard thus far and to hear additional comments
3. Brief overview of planning process, organization, timeline, level of detail
4. Comments we've received:
  - ◆ Plan structure - organization, missing elements, flesh-out sections, corrections/clarifications
  - ◆ Mapping – needed updates to land use and wetland coverages
  - ◆ Objectives – clarification of long-term and short-term objectives
  - ◆ Approach – starting point, decisions to be made, details to add
  - ◆ Site selection – SWG, TMDL, enforcement, impaired waters, vernal pools
  - ◆ Utilize existing data gathered from permits, compliance monitoring
5. Other comments, questions, ideas
6. Where do we go from here?

## THANK YOU!

### For your comments:

Huge thanks to those of you who provided comments on the draft plan! They have been tremendously helpful for improving the structure, objectives, and proposed actions of the plan. We recognize that your efforts to comment on the plan and attend meetings, while essential to us, are voluntary for you. Thank you for participating!

### For the opportunity to collaborate:

We also value the opportunity to work together with so many people from within DEM and in various organizations in RI on an initiative to better understand and protect wetlands. We look forward to continuing the collaboration.

## MEETINGS

We met separately (with some overlap) with DEM and with Partners in the State. Our intention is not to keep the groups separate, but to find a manageable way to keep track of comments and needs both within and outside of DEM. The following notes summarize comments from both meetings.

## INTRODUCTION

At both meetings, Carol reviewed why DEM created a freshwater monitoring and assessment plan:

- a) Under the Clean Water Act, states are required to report on the condition of all waters of the United States. Wetlands are included in the definition of surface waters in RI, therefore, wetland monitoring is an element of the comprehensive surface water monitoring strategy in RI,
- b) Wetland monitoring and assessment is an EPA wetland program priority, and
- c) Wetland monitoring and assessment is a critical element of RI's comprehensive wetland program.

At the meeting with DEM staff, Carol briefly explained the structure and function of newly formed Bay and Watershed Coordination Team, and the RI Environmental Monitoring Collaborative (RIEMC). The wetland monitoring plan has been posted on the Collaborative website (by Pete August) and a later draft will likely be reviewed by the Collaborative in addition to review by the RI DEM office of water, wetland partners, and EPA.

## COMMENTS

### ◆ **Plan structure - organization, missing elements, flesh-out sections, corrections/clarifications**

Suggestions were made to reorganize the plan sections to help make it more clear and concise, moving some of the research details to an appendix and including objectives earlier in the document. Missing elements include a table of contents, glossary, executive summary, a list of wetland partners, acknowledgments, references, and additional tables of information where useful. Text and additional references were provided for some sections that require more information. Corrections and clarifications were made to existing text and references.

### ◆ **Mapping – needed updates to land use and wetland coverages**

We heard from almost everyone who commented that the existing data for land use/land cover and wetlands in RIGIS are out of date and inaccurate, and should not be used to build a new wetland assessment tool at the landscape level.

The need for accurate RIGIS data is widespread among, State, University, Federal, private, non-profit, and local entities in RI who rely on landscape level data for planning, management, and research activities. Sue Kiernan reported that the RIEMC plans to discuss mapping needs at their next meeting.

In our next draft of the plan, we will emphasize the critical need for an updated wetlands coverage and will delay addressing objectives that depend on this coverage, such as identifying wetlands for open space acquisition using a landscape level assessment tool. We will still propose to use existing RIGIS data layers to characterize wetlands near water withdrawal sites.

## ◆ Objectives – clarification of long-term and short-term objectives

### In general:

Overall, wetland partners agree that our four priority objectives are on target and should be pursued.

1. Prioritize wetlands for open space acquisition.

Comments:

-“Acquisition” seems too narrow.

-It’s really the adjacent uplands that should be acquired.

NOTE: This objective will be delayed given the essential need to acquire accurate wetlands coverage in RIGIS.

2. Develop and implement methods for baseline monitoring of impacts to wetlands due to water withdrawals.

Comments:

- delete the word “baseline” which usually refers to condition before some action is taken.

3. Monitor and assess impacts to wetlands due to loss and degradation of buffer zones.

Comments:

- broaden issues related to buffers. e.g. ID potential restoration sites.

4. Monitor location and extent to which invasive species are present and affecting wetland condition.

Comments:

- timing of invasives monitoring is good.

### Long-term objectives:

Some questions were raised about whether the objective we have listed in long-term objectives, “Develop baseline data to evaluate wetland condition,” should be a short-term objective instead. Our idea for this objective was that we would be building a database of conditional information about wetlands in RI over time. Such a database could then be used to examine trends in overall condition or specific parameters over time. We will likely keep this objective, but rephrase it to be more clear about our intention.

We discussed an additional long-term objective, “to identify program and policy changes needed to improve overall wetland condition statewide.” Such an objective is in line with our stated goal of improving management and protection of wetlands in RI.

### Short-term objectives:

To address the comments we received about developing baseline data for wetland inventory and condition, we will propose development of an inventory or profile of wetlands in RI as a short-term objective using existing data and information about wetlands in RI. For example, in their publication, “Development of a Statewide Freshwater Wetland Restoration Strategy,” Miller and Golet (2001) include tables of wetland acreage by class and watershed, as well as wetland ownership by watershed. We will combine this existing information with some other landscape data to develop a profile of wetlands statewide.

## ◆ Approach – starting point, decisions to be made, details to add

Initially we planned to begin implementation of wetland monitoring and assessment by developing a landscape assessment tool and then use that tool to address several of our objectives. Given the critical need for updated wetlands and land use coverages, we will delay development of a landscape tool and instead focus on how to meet our objectives using a rapid assessment tool in the field. Partners felt that a Rapid Assessment Method (RAM, Level 2) could be identified and tested in year 1.

Simultaneously, existing RIGIS data are considered adequate to begin characterizing wetlands near water withdrawal sites (Level 1). We will use the initial characterization, in part, to select sample locations in the field and then test the RAM at those sites.

Details of year 1 work (and beyond) will be added in work plans for implementation and shared with Partners as we have them. We plan to form a dedicated workgroup of people to help decide which Rapid Assessment Methods to test, and how best to do that in the field.

◆ **Site selection – SWG, TMDL, enforcement, impaired waters, vernal pools**

We will add a section to the plan to describe several opportunities to collaborate with other programs that focus on wetlands in RI. One way to work together is to sample in the same general locations or to sample specific types of wetlands. For example,

- DEM's comprehensive surface water monitoring strategy is advocating a rotating basin approach. We plan to sample in those same basins.
- Another need we recognize is monitoring restoration of wetlands through compliance requirements (coordinating with DEM C & I division).
- There is an additional opportunity to monitor at Heritage Program Element occurrence sites where there are wetland species or species that require wetland habitats. (coordinating with SWG, NHP, RINHS, and TNC).
- We also have an interest in monitoring wetlands near impaired waters (coordinating with DEM surface water and TMDL groups)
- Vernal pool monitoring is another area of interest (coordinating with NRCS, URI, EPA AED)

Partners recognize that the RIEMC is a good forum for sharing information about existing programs and can help facilitate coordination.

◆ **Utilize existing data gathered from permits, compliance monitoring**

In addition to research data outside DEM, there are existing data at DEM from permits and compliance monitoring that may be a good source of data to use for wetland monitoring and assessment.

**OTHER COMMENTS**

In order for this work to be successful, we have to continue to focus on how results will be used. Questions driving this are, 'What are we likely to do to make a change that would improve wetland condition statewide?' and 'What information do we need?' A summary of the number of wetland acres in a certain condition are interesting, but not enough. We want to tie results to buffers, for example, which can lead to policy changes, or enforcement or permitting changes. There is an opportunity for education and outreach to towns to show them how to enhance their own plans to value and protect wetlands.

Existing programs, such as the Farm, Forest, and Open Space Act, can be described in the wetland monitoring plan as they relate to wetland protection.

Partners recognize wetland monitoring and assessment as a huge undertaking that requires financial and human resources. Needs of the program should be clearly stated in the plan.

EPA is encouraging us to begin the work at a manageable scale.

**NEXT STEPS**

In the coming weeks, we will revise the plan following your comments. We will also develop more detailed work plans for year 1 activities. As soon as the next draft is available (by the end of July), we will send it out for your review.

**ADDITIONAL COMMENTS STILL WELCOME!**

If you haven't had a chance to send me comments, please do so. We're ready to make revisions and want to incorporate as many ideas as we can.

Thanks!

Deb